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"EYE-POPPING." Variety

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VARIETY

BEST PICTURE

BRIAN TYREE HENRY JOURNEYS TO HIS FIRST OSCAR NOM

BY JENELLE RILEY

BIZ+BUZZ

Fight the Power

Oscar's best picture lineup questions authority, traditions and the establishment

By Gregg Goldstein

From the most commercial movies to the artiest of arthouse fare, all of the year's best picture Oscar nominees have one thing in common: themes of power struggles and an anti-authoritarian streak. This reporter spoke to the filmmakers behind "All Quiet on the Western Front," "Avatar: The Way of Water," "The Banshees of Inisherin," "Elvis," "Everything Everywhere All at Once," "The Fabelmans," "Tár," "Triangle of Sadness" and "Women Talking" about how they explored these topics and why they're relevant today.

"Our world is at an inflection point where we're questioning hierarchical power," says "Tár" writer-director Todd Field. "There's a reason we're seeing movements against authority and people that have held power: for a long time, no one questioned it."

Cover photograph by Dan Doperalski

"Avatar: The Way of Water" filmmakers wanted to make a statement about using global resources thoughtfully.

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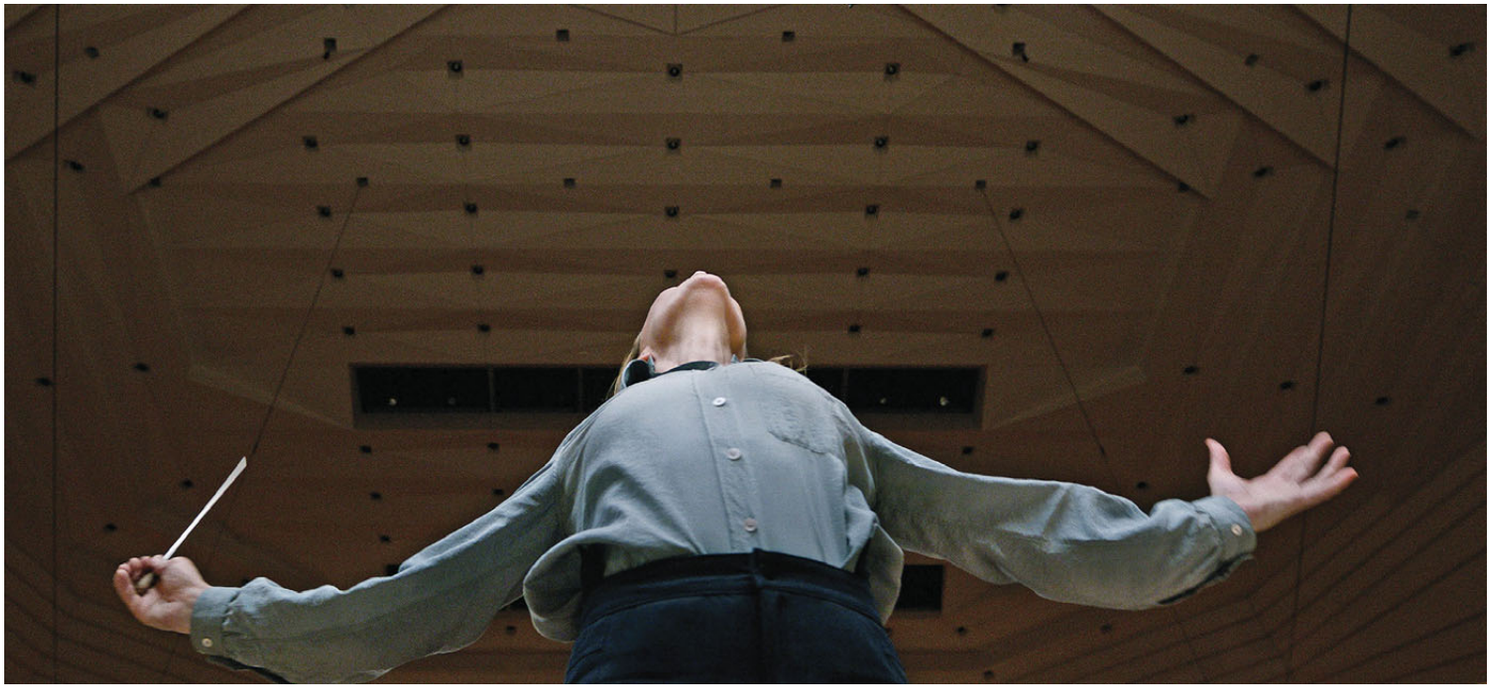

"Tár" director Todd Field wanted to examine the intoxicating influence of patriarchal power by applying it a woman.

"Women Talking" producer Dede Gardner thinks that "reckoning with authoritarian thinking, power structures and behavior systems is the issue of our day. I think it's scaring people [because] we don't know what to do about it, and it's coming out of places we never expected."

Those include the reversal of Roe v. Wade, Russia's war against Ukraine, the #MeToo and #OscarsSoWhite movements, onetime Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney reportedly "reckoning with what he considers his party's slide toward authoritarianism," anti-LGBTQ+ laws and rising levels of prejudice and police brutality. But in a few cases, art imitating life is an unfortunate coincidence.

"I don't think we knew that our movie would be coming out at the same time our former president was having a dinner with a Holocaust denier and an unmedicated bipolar anti-Semite rapper," says "The Fabelmans" producer/co-writer Tony Kushner.

Even the third top-grossing film in history is addressing these issues. "We think that we have a responsibility in making the 'Avatar' films to shine a mirror on ourselves as a global community," says Jon Landau, who produced "Avatar: The Way of Water" with director/co-writer James Cameron. "The idea of imperial forces with heavy weapons trying to take over and destroy the natural resources of a planet, [leading to] an uprising from the Indigenous population, is a very important theme and message to have resonated."

And it already has. "Our distributor in Ukraine, who said that it's going to become the highest-grossing movie of all time there, [said Ukranians] go to see a movie where brute military forces come in and Indigenous people fight back, and it gives them inspiration for what they're going through."

The musical biopic "Elvis" is another hit that explores these themes. "No one's ever focused on that aspect of the film, and that's primarily why I did it," says director/co-writer Baz Luhrmann, who produced it with Catherine Martin, Gail Berman, Patrick McCormick and Schuyler Weiss. "The subtext is exploring America in the '50s, '60s and '70s, and if you do that, you can't avoid power structures between the 'sell' and the 'soul.' The soul, or the art, is the Elvis character, and the sell is the Colonel's character. When they are in balance, it works. But when it's only about how many coffee cups can I get [Elvis'] face on, you get this incredible corruption."

Luhrmann based examples of this on unreleased material he found in Presley's archives. "You [also] cannot overstate what a threat Elvis was seen as to the white establishment and those that were anti-desegregation, because he was blending Black music and country music," he adds. "It became a political issue. They wanted to put him in jail, and the Colonel's plot was, 'We'll send him off to the army, bring him back and make him a nice family entertainer.'"

A few nominees made these themes the main foundation of their films. One is "Tár," which shows the downfall of a fictional conductor, played by Cate Blanchett. "I'd always thought of the character as a woman, probably because most of us are so certain how we're supposed to feel about the white male patriarchal abuse of power, because we see it in our lives every day, [but that's] a huge impediment to examining it," says Field, who produced "Tár" with Alexandra Milchan and Scott Lambert. "I wanted the fact that the character is female [to be] a given, and in that way it's a fairy tale, a parable. This was important to [be able to] look at: what is the intoxicating factor of patriarchal power? Why is it so consistent? Why do people want it, and what does it do to the person that holds it?"

Another film that dives deep into these topics is Sarah Polley's "Women Talking," the story of Mennonite women who debate their future after violent attacks by men in their community. It's based on Miriam Toews' 2018 novel and begins with a caption from the book's prologue: "What follows is an act of female imagination."

"We were interested in the idea of imagining a new future, as opposed to spending all your time adjudicating the past," says Gardner, who produced it with Jeremy Kleiner and the film's co-star, Frances McDormand. "It presents people who've come to realize that in order to stay true to their faith with integrity, they must question power systems that have grown up around them. [We wanted to] engender hope."

The novel was loosely based on attacks in a Bolivian Menno-

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The Wall Street Journal

"THIS IS AN ABSOLUTE JEWEL."
The Hollywood Reporter

The Quiet Girl

DIRECTED BY COLM BAIRÉAD

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nite community in 2009. "In the real-life event, when the women started to talk about what had been happening to them, [they were told] 'Your faith isn't strong enough,' 'This was the act of Satan' and 'This is female imagination.' So [the story] is a way to reclaim the power of that, which has been so criminally misdirected as an accusation."

Steven Spielberg's semi-autobiographical coming-of-age tale "The Fabelmans" has fewer than 10 minutes of screen time depicting antisemitic acts, but they're memorable ones, such as when the lead character finds a bagel with a slur written on it, hanging on a noose in his locker.

"I'm pretty sure the bagel thing happened to Steven," says Kushner, who co-wrote the film with Spielberg and produced it with him and Kristie Macosko Krieger. "He had one antisemitic bully. Growing up in Louisiana, I had two. It's one of the ways Steven and I bonded when we worked on [the 2005 Israeli hostage drama] 'Munich.' But there was never a sense that he felt his life was shaped by it."

Another theme is anti-feminism, found in the thwarted ambitions of the matriarch, Mitzi (Michelle Williams). "It was a time when there was a sense that you were probably going to get punished for [having a career]. There'd be a kind of ambivalent support, but also a certain amount of disapproval or animus."

Familial expectations also play a big role in Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert's "Everything Everywhere All at Once." Exploring issues as characters travel from a Chinese immigrant-owned Laundromat to an IRS office audit and into a multiverse is complicated, but Jonathan Wang, who produced it with the Daniels, is well up to the task. Themes of anti-authoritarianism and power imbalances are "something Daniels and I think about constantly," Wang says. "There's the narrative structure, and there's the way that we chose to make it — [not basing] people's value on their job title — that actively go against some of the power systems within our industry."

One subtext in "Elvis" is the racial relations in the 1950s and 1960s.

Kane Skennar/Warner Bros.

[Steven Spielberg] had one anti-Semitic bully. Growing up in Louisiana I had two. It was one of the ways we bonded when we worked on 'Munich.' But there was never a sense that he felt his life was shaped by it." — Tony Kushner

In the film, "the one that's most apparent is fighting against the tyranny of violence. What does it look like if you end an action movie with a pacifistic fight instead of a violent one?"

Another one is battling parental authority. "A lot of our characters fight the expectations and burdens of the previous generation, and traumas that they have passed on to their kids. The movie [puts] us into another world, wherein we can see our family [outside of their] ideologies, as whole humans we can actively love."

Martin McDonagh's "The Banshees of Inisherin" follows two lifelong pals from a small Irish island whose lives descend into chaos when Colm (Brendan Gleeson) tells Pádraic (Colin Farrell) that wants to end their friendship so he can devote more time to writing music.

"It's a breakup movie, about the breakup of a platonic friendship," says Graham Broadbent, who produced it with Pete Czernin and McDonagh. "Colm seems to hold all the power and Pádraic is the victim, to a degree, because he doesn't hold any cards to play. When any of us get broken up with, in moments both sober and not, you're trying to work out the best scheme to get them back."

Though it's not overtly political, "Banshees" is set near the end of the Irish Civil War in 1923, with a battle seen in the distance at one point. McDonagh has downplayed the connection, but he told the Atlantic: "All you need to know is that [the war] was over a hairline difference of beliefs which had been shared up until the year before. And it led to horrific violence. The main story is that, too: negligible differences that end up, well, spoiler alert, not in a good place."

So how much of the film is an allegory for Ireland's many decades of internal conflict that pit longtime friends against each other?

"Martin always likes things to be ambiguous to a degree. It's for

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In "Women Talking" the filmmakers wanted the titular women to question the beliefs they had been raised in.

people to work out in their own way," Broadbent says. "We never visit [the Civil War, or] the differences between the two parties there. It's really for Martin to say. There are definite echoes of the Civil War, but it's a human text that can happen anywhere."

McDonagh has also said that Pádraic, who's kind, and Colm, who's ruthless in pursuit of his art, correspond to two sides of his personality. "He plays into the difference between [a devotion to] art and being nice, which is a power struggle for certain people," Broadbent says. "How much time should we spend creating and isolate ourselves at any expense, versus how important is it to be nice to people? And then there's a very sad power imbalance between Dominic [Barry Keoghan] and his abusive father."

Few war stories are as powerful as Erich Maria Remarque's 1929 novel "All Quiet on the Western Front." Edward Berger's new German film adaptation begins with a schoolmaster telling students that "modern warfare is like a game of chess. It's never about the individual. It's always about the whole."

Producer Malte Grunert says Berger put together the lines based on real speeches from that time. "['Front'] is about young men who are true believers of right-wing nationalist propaganda, lies and hate speech, who go to war thinking it's an adventure," Grunert adds. "It's a reminder of what can happen if resistance or anti-authoritarianism is not strong enough. If you were looking for a contemporary parallel, it's possibly young Russian conscripts who believe the propaganda they hear at home and are being sent to the Ukraine with used uniforms [as soldiers are in our film]. I'm reading articles that say that is actually happening."

Writer-director Ruben Östlund satirizes capitalism, the ultra-rich and male-female power dynamics in "Triangle of Sadness" by flipping each on its head. In this dark comedy from producers Erik Hemmendorff and Philippe Bober, a female influencer and the male model boyfriend she out-earns take a luxury cruise in which in a twist of fate turns the ruling class into servants.

['All Quiet on the Western Front'] is a reminder of what can happen if resistance or anti-authoritarianism is not strong enough." — Malte Grunert

"We need to believe that authorities are people we can trust, or that there's some non-corrupt structure to our society," Östlund says. "Satire is very often dealing with hierarchies, power, economic influences. So I understand why people can get very provoked by [the film]."

Yet it's all familiar to Östlund. "My mother became a communist, and my brother became right-wing. So I was constantly hearing political debate in my home where Lenin and Marx were mentioned. It was a bit like looking at the world from a very Eastern and Western perspective."

One might think that a movie about the Navy popular with right-leaning audiences wouldn't be anti-authoritarian. But Joseph Kosinski's "Top Gun: Maverick" — produced by Tom Cruise, Christopher McQuarrie, David Ellison and Jerry Bruckheimer — kicks off with its title character [Cruise] disobeying orders to help save his "Darkstar" scramjet program, which officer [Ed Harris] wants to defund.

"He's still Maverick and he's still a rebel, and wants to stick it to Ed Harris, and he wants to take that Darkstar plane up and save everyone's jobs because he knows that they're going to be shut down unless he can go to Mach 10," editor Eddie Hamilton told *Variety*.

So why are all these anti-authoritarian films examining power struggles rising to the top now?

"Everything" producer Wang has an idea. "We've come out of a Trump presidency that led to an insurrection, and then we came out of COVID, which felt like this strong-handed government move to keep everyone locked down," he says. "We're all skeptical, feeling like we are being manipulated by algorithms, [so much] that we don't even know what we want or what our tastes are, because we are so particularly advertised to that our own attention and ideas are monetized. We've all felt these power structures so clearly, and also wanted these power structures to keep us safe. That's a contradiction that's hard to reconcile.

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Argentina's Jimmy Stewart Brings Integrity

Ricardo Darin has toplined seven Oscar-nominated international films

By Anna Marie de la Fuente

Since 1961, Argentina has been sending films to vie in the foreign film race and Ricardo Darin, the country's most celebrated actor, stars in at least seven of them, including this year's nominee, "Argentina 1985." That's no mean feat but given his lifetime commitment to his craft, perhaps not surprising.

Four of them: "Son of the Bride" (2001), "The Secret in their Eyes" (2009), "Wild Tales" (2014) and now the Amazon Studios-backed "Argentina 1985," have either been shortlisted or in the case of Juan José Campanella's "The Secret in Their Eyes," taken home the golden statuette. Given its wins at the Venice Film Festival, the National Board of Review and the Golden Globes as well as the growing buzz, "Argentina 1985" may again clinch the honor.

Before his international career-launching turn in 2000 heist drama "Nine Queens," which spawned a Hollywood remake, Darin, 66, had already worked in 35 films, aside from numerous roles in television, the theater and commercials from the time he was a toddler. As a child, he aspired to become either a veterinarian or a psychiatrist but the calling of his family's legacy was too loud.

"I decided to follow the path my family has forged," says Darin whose parents are both actors. His sister Alejandra and son, Chino, are also thespians.

"Ricardo is an uncommon actor. Like James Stewart, he brings integrity and familiarity to the characters he embodies. He builds every role from his own identity, making both character and player indivisible," says "Argentina 1985" helmer Santiago Mitre.

Ricardo Darin stars in Oscar-nominated "Argentina 1985" as prosecutor Julio Cesar Strassera.

"He is intuitive, honest, intelligent, approachable and empathic. It is a pleasure to work with him, not only for his overwhelming charm or his marvelous precision, but also for his understanding of all aspects of cinema. Ricardo is the ultimate collaborator, someone who will advise you and will help you think about every detail of a film. And besides that, he is one of the funniest people I know."

"Ricardo is part of the whole creative process, usually from early drafts, but he sticks to the written word, usually giving both depth and humor without improvising," says the drama's producer Axel Kuschevatzky of Infinity Hill, who has been involved in 11 films with Darin since "The Secret in Their Eyes."

"I don't tend to improvise unless certain scenes call for it; I prefer to discuss the script in depth and then respect it," Darin says. "Don't believe anything Santiago and Axel say," he quips.

"Ricardo is the sheer definition of a storyteller — someone with a deep understanding of what audiences expect from movies, yet he is always willing to try new things, to challenge himself in every project, as an actor, producer and even as a director," Kuschevatzky says. "His sense of humor is unparalleled and he makes life better for everyone, both in and out of the set. Ricardo is simply one of the good guys."

As he always does, Darin followed his gut to accept the part of prosecutor Julio Cesar Strassera in the film, which dramatizes Argentina's Trial of the Juntas in which members of the defeated military dictatorship were taken to court. Of course, other factors weigh in: the script, the director, the cast etc.

"I'm interested in stories about human conflict. I also love comedies but as Peter O'Toole said: 'Life is easy. Comedy is hard,'" he says twisting the actor's words some.

"The film resonated with people because it may be a local Argentine story but it touches on a universal theme, the call for justice. I recited Strassera's actual closing remarks verbatim 30 times and in each instance, there wasn't a dry eye in the court," he recalls of the "cathartic" shooting experience.

What's next? Darin does not rule out working in Hollywood. "I received an offer some months ago but I couldn't because of a scheduling conflict," he says. Meanwhile he'll be working on a new project, still under wraps, which starts filming in Argentina in May.

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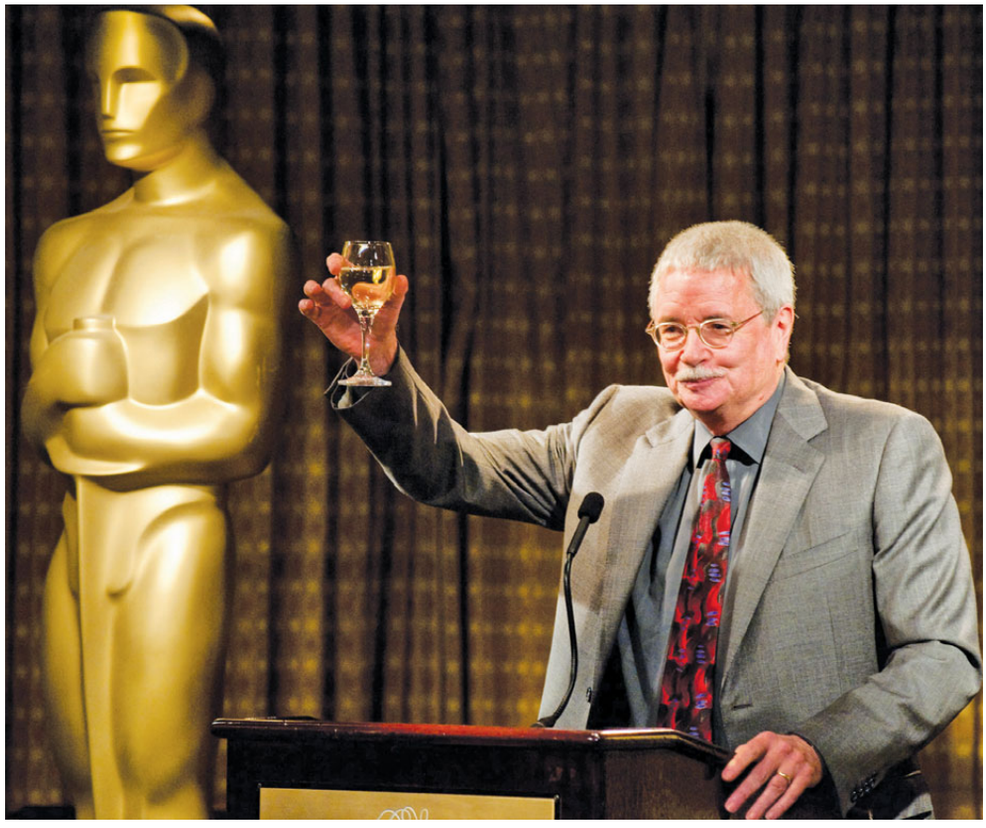
Oscar's 95 Years of Growing Pains

The Academy has never had an easy time, thanks to int'l films, politics and critics

By Tim Gray



Todd Wawrychuk/© A.M.P.A.S.

Former Academy executive director Bruce Davis has written the definitive book on the Oscars.

Millions of moviegoers think the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences has one purpose: To hand out Oscars. Members know that's not true and veteran AMPAS exec Bruce Davis has written a new book "The Academy and the Award: The Coming of Age of Oscar and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences" (Brandeis University Press) about the early decades of the group, showing that awards were initially a low priority.

Davis also makes clear that the group, formed in 1927 as movies were undergoing seismic shifts, made decisions that forever changed the way we watch movies — but that had nothing to do with Oscar.

The org was the brainchild of MGM exec Louis B. Mayer, whose goal was "to stymie the formation of craft unions," Davis writes.

So for several years the Acad became an arbiter of labor disputes, which nearly led to its downfall.

But even before that, AMPAS leaders tackled the issue of moviegoing, since the new fly-by-night entertainment had evolved into an industry.

In conversation, Davis tells *Variety* that while researching for his book, "I realized what a Wild West moviegoing was through the whole silent period."

The group conducted extensive studies and established standards for theater screen illumination, detailed the growing use of incandescent lighting on film sets, and led the drive for a single standard screen size that became known as the Academy Ratio.

Significantly, as the book states, the Acad became "a clearinghouse" for sound challenges and ways to train sound workers "for an industry that was nearly devoid of people who knew how to record or reproduce sound."

Among their first objectives was "fostering understanding that their medium owed more to technology than any art form that had previously existed."

Davis tells *Variety*, "Suddenly the Academy successfully imposed a quality control on the experience of going to the movies; that's important and I don't think the Academy has been given credit for it."

The Academy was doing heroic work but after a few years, the industry turned on them.

Before Hollywood guilds were created, Academy honchos decided they were labor arbiters. In first five years, the Acad's conciliation committee settled nearly 350 disputes between actors and producers and more than 50 between writers and producers, Davis says.

But people in the industry hated AMPAS. The org's 1927 bylaws list five groups of members: actors, directors, writers, producers and technicians. The use of that last word has vexed behind-the-camera workers for nearly a century. But it was the producers group that caused the strife.

Davis tells *Variety* that 1933 was the rock bottom for AMPAS. After six years, the Acad seemed ready to fold, he writes. They were discouraged "by the steady drop in membership numbers, by the escalating financial problems, and by the organization's failure

to establish a vital role in the evolving industry."

The Academy fired everyone and virtually shut down, due to finances and animosity toward producer members.

The Screen Writers Guild, Screen Actors Guild and Directors Guild were created 1933-1936. Eddie Cantor, second president of SAG, summed up the feeling of the new guilds by frequently proclaiming in his speeches, "The Academy must be destroyed!"

While losing support of Hollywood workers, the Academy was also facing financial hardships.

For many years, its only source of income was members' dues. Davis writes that radio stations began carrying live broadcasts of the Academy Awards in their second year, but within an eight-year period, the Academy didn't earn a cent, because its decision-makers found the idea of sponsorship to be distasteful.

"The biggest surprise in my research was how impoverished the Academy was through its early history," Davis tells *Variety*. "The industry resisted putting Oscars on television, but it was the salvation of the organization."

In the 21st century, there has been renewed criticism that the Academy is too parochial, favoring Hollywood movies at the expense of works from other countries. That issue has existed since its formation.

The org was designed to be elitist, accepting only top professionals. And the narrow focus was for U.S. films.

Davis writes that when the group was forming in the first quarter of 1927, one proposed name was the Intl. Academy of Cinema Arts & Sciences. Davis notes that "'international' exceeded any realistic grasp for the infant academy and, in any case, some of its founders strongly preferred that the org restrict its focus to the U.S. industry."

For example, the four wins for the 1948 "Hamlet," including best picture and actor, angered many members because it was considered a foreign film. As Davis writes about the handwringing by members, "major awards went not just to foreign but to highbrow, artistic pictures." It's a complaint that the public has aired ever since.

Not everybody was xenophobic. In the 1940s, AMPAS prexy Walter Wanger proposed that the Academy find a way to honor films from other countries: "He was afraid that if the Academy continued to ignore most of that overseas output, the organization would soon come to look provincial in the eyes of the world."

The idea gained traction in the 1940s, but soon hit a speedbump with the Hollywood Blacklist: There was concern about nominating a film from behind the Iron Curtain.

Starting in 1947, a committee recommended which films to consider for its one-winner-a-year foreign-language Oscar. It became a competitive category in 1956 and four years later, the Academy proudly announced that invitations to participate had been issued to "every country in the free world." That triggered a front-page story in *Variety* questioning what constituted the "free world," since Russia was invited but Bulgaria wasn't.

Janet Gaynor holds the statuetta (top)at the inaugural Academy Awards, May 16, 1929, surrounded by execs; (above) Louis B. Mayer in his office in the 1940s.

Finally, Acad prez Valentine Davies consulted with the U.S. State Dept. and they decided all sovereign nations were to be included, except Mainland China, Albania and maybe Hungary.

Actually, most modern criticisms of AMPAS are not new.

● There have been recent accusations that the Academy is out of touch and will soon become obsolete. Those predictions were also aired many times, beginning in 1933.

● In August 2018, AMPAS was criticized for a clumsy attempt to include the public. It proposed a "best popular movie" award and in 2022 initiated #OscarsFanFavorite and #OscarsCheerMoment. Nothing new here. In 1927, there was a plan to add a group of "fan members" to the Acad and to publish a journal aimed at moviegoers.

● There have been modern cries to shorten the TV broadcast by presenting some awards off-camera. That proposal in 2019 caused an uproar, and it was done for the 2022 ceremony, with vows it wouldn't happen again. The idea has been regularly proposed since 1959.

● In 2012, newspapers reported that the Academy members were overwhelmingly Caucasian and male. AMPAS prexy Gregory Peck in 1967 began to expand membership to combat accusations that the group was too geriatric. And there was an outcry when the press exaggerated the number of older members who were asked to step aside.

With a proliferation of digital sites, all of these things have been reported as if they're new.

Oscar is 95 this year and at that age, you've seen it all, been through it all.

"The industry resisted putting Oscars on television, but it was the salvation of the organization." —Bruce Davis

(Top) Photofest; (Bottom) Everett Collection

Director Nominees Also in the Scribe Tribe

For the first time in Oscar history all the helming candidates also got screenplay mentions

By Tim Gray

Allyson Riggs/A24

GRAY'S GOLD

This year, all the Oscar-contending directors are nominated for original screenplay: the Daniels (Daniel Kwan, Daniel Scheinert), Todd Field, Martin McDonagh, Ruben Östlund and Steven Spielberg (writing with Tony Kushner).

This is the first time it's happened in AMPAS history.

The only year that came close was 2017, when all five helmers had written or co-written their scripts, though they didn't all get writing noms.

So here's Film History 101.

In Hollywood lore, Preston Sturges is often credited as the first scribe to become a hyphenate, as writer-director of the 1940 "The Great McGinty." But as with all Hollywood "facts," there is only an element of truth here.

In the next few years, he was joined by some heavyweights: Orson Welles ("Citizen Kane") and John Huston ("The Maltese Falcon") in 1941; Leo McCarey (co-writer of "Going My Way"); Billy Wilder (writing with Raymond Chandler) for "Double Indemnity" in 1944; and Joseph L. Mankiewicz ("Dragonwyck"), 1946.

However, a writer-director wasn't an innovation. The silent era had such double-duty (or triple-duty) filmmakers as Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Lois Weber and D.W. Griffith. But this was before the studio chiefs reorganized the structure of filmmaking and before guilds were formed in the 1930s. Credits were often less structured then.

It may come as no surprise that Hollywood did not invent moviemaking — or hyphenates.

Jay Weissberg, critic and film historian, tells *Variety* about writer-directors in Japan including Kaeriyama Norimasa as early as 1918 and Yasujirō Shimazu by 1922. Yasujiro Ozu ("Tokyo Story") began working as a hyphenate on "Zange no Yaiba" (1927).

Weissberg also cites France's Abel Gance and Marcel L'Herbier, and Soviet Union's Yakov Protazanov (including a 1915 "War and Peace") and Dziga Vertov, 1929's "Man With a Camera."

That's not even mentioning many countries with a long history of filmmaking, including Argentina, Britain, Egypt, India, Italy and Mexico

So while Sturges is in the filmmakers pantheon, he wasn't exactly a pioneer. And while Hollywood execs balked at changes to their system, voters at the Academy quickly embraced the hyphenates. Sturges won for "McGinty" and was nominated again for his 1944 classics "The Miracle of Morgan's Creek" and "Hail the Conquering Hero." The following year, Wilder won for his fourth film, "The Lost Weekend," as both writer (with Charles Brackett) and director.

Daniel Kwan, Daniel Scheinert both wrote and directed "Everything Everywhere All at Once."

Most of this year's directing nominees also have a third: as one of the film's producers.

Does having multiple noms increase your odds of winning? Well, if you're nominated for three, you have tripled your chances. But there are two dozen triple nominees, and some went home empty-handed. Winners include: Wilder, "The Apartment" (1960); Francis Ford Coppola, "The Godfather, Part II" (1974); James L. Brooks, "Terms of Endearment" (1983); Peter Jackson, "The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King" (2003); Joel & Ethan Coen, "No Country for Old Men" (2007): and Alejandro G. Iñárritu, "Birdman" (2014).

And Bong Joon Ho took home four Oscars for "Parasite."

The People's Choice

Brian Tyree Henry has long been an audience favorite for his standout roles — and now he's an Oscar nominee for 'Causeway'

Story by
JENELLE RILEY

Photograph by
DAN DOPERALSKI

BRIAN TYREE HENRY celebrated his first Oscar nomination by hugging a stranger. ¶"This poor guy, this poor white man," Henry recalls with a laugh. The actor, who is currently shooting the Apple TV+ series "Sinking Spring" in Philadelphia, had spent the morning in his building's gym with his phone on "do not disturb." As he stepped into the elevator following his workout, he turned his phone on. "It started pinging and banging with notifications. There was 130-something text messages. I opened the first one and just saw: 'Congratulations.' And I screamed."

At this point, they were trapped. "The doors of the elevator were closing. He can't go anywhere now," Henry says, then reveals the following exchange:

"I said, 'I was just nominated!'"

"He said, 'That's great, for what?'"

"I told him, 'It was for an Oscar!"

"He said, 'Cool what movie was it?'"

"I said, 'Who cares!'"

Henry still laughs at the memory. "He hugged me and it was very sweet. And if the fates are as strong as I think they are, we will never see each other again. I feel so bad for trapping him in this space and screaming."

By now that gentleman has probably figured out the movie is "Causeway," a thoughtful indie drama in which Henry plays James, a car mechanic whose kind nature belies an unspeakable grief. The film, now available on Apple TV+, casts the actor opposite Jennifer Lawrence as Lynsey, a soldier struggling with brain damage as the two embark on a tentative friendship.

It's been a while since the nomination day, but Henry says it still doesn't feel real — and he's still sharing it with so many people, including strangers. "Walking the streets of Philly, people have come up to me and they're so happy and elated for me. The love and support has been incredible — I even got free cookies at Insomnia Cookies!"

Henry is thrilled that people seem to feel a personal connection with the nom. "I think it might have something to do with what my family said: 'You being nominated makes us feel like it's all of ours and like we won in a way.' And it is truly something I share. It's not just for me, it's for every single person who ever supported me. Whoever saw me in the background or noticed me in a scene or put in a good word for me or fostered my work. Even if they didn't know my name, even if they think it's Brian Austin Green."

There has been a celebratory feel to Henry's recognition, perhaps because "Causeway" is a smaller, more intimate film than so many of the movies in the Oscar race. But Henry is also one of those actors that commands attention. After starting his career in the theater (including originating the role of the General in "Book of Mormon"), he quickly sprang to prominence with his Emmy-nominated role as rapper Alfred "Paper Boi" Miles in the FX series "Atlanta." He then transitioned to film roles that made a maximum impact with minimum screen time, from a crime boss terrorizing Viola Davis and her dog in "Widows" to stealing "If Beale Street Could Talk" with a single scene as a prison parolee. In many ways, the only surprising part of Henry's Oscar nomination was that it didn't happen sooner.

AppleTV+

Noms Magnet
Brian Tyree Henry has been in "Lobby Hero" (above), "Causeway" with Jennifer Lawrence and "Atlanta" with Donald Glover.

Henry has always been an actor who was hard not to notice, according to "Causeway" director Lila Neugebauer, who met him when she snuck into a rehearsal room when they were both students at Yale University. "Even then, I couldn't take my eyes off him," she says. "And for much of the rehearsal, the focus wasn't even on his character. But I kept watching him."

Henry was raised primarily in Washington, D.C., a world away from Hollywood, and his journey to Yale, then Broadway then Hollywood is a path he never could have imagined. "In order to talk about how I got here, I have to reveal a bit about my upbringing," he notes. "And there is a respect for my upbringing because without it, I wouldn't be where I am. But my domestic life wasn't incredibly nurturing. There was a lot of strife, a lot of poverty, a lot of pain under that roof."

Tyree was the youngest of five children and says that by the time he was born, most of his siblings were already adults. "I was truly raised by the television and by dollar movies at the theaters. I can remember going on a Saturday and sitting through three movies in a row," he recalls. He learned to read at the age of 3 and his father would also drop him at the library, where he would spend the day "reading books I had no business reading" like Anne Rice novels when he was only 5 or 6.

At age 8, he was introduced to his first play, "Romeo and Juliet," and he was given the assignment to perform a monologue by Lord Capulet, who has just discovered his daughter is sneaking around with a Montague. "I was dealing with a lot of things under my roof with my father," he recalls. "And something about this monologue busted me open. I remember grabbing the sides of the podium and shaking it. I was spitting all over the place. People were whispering and holding onto their desks and their faces were like, 'What the fuck is wrong with him?'"

Henry says he immediately felt better — lighter, like he had lifted a weight off his chest. "I felt like I had been heard. I wasn't reaching anyone at home, but I felt like I was finally reaching someone," he says. His teacher asked him to stay after class. Although he was concerned he was in trouble, instead she simply told him, "You have to go to drama club."

"She was right," Henry says simply. "Plays and acting became a way for me to escape. I would read these plays and think: Somebody out there has experienced what I've been through and they put it on paper. How cool is that?"

Henry is still in awe of how his humble beginnings have brought him here and tickled by the roles he lands, from playing an immortal being in Marvel's "The Eternals" to fighting Brad Pitt on "Bullet Train" to battling monsters in "Godzilla vs. Kong" and its upcoming sequel. In many ways, he says being on a set takes him back to spending an entire day in that dollar movie theater.

"I even got a chance to run away from Chucky!" he exclaims, referring to his role as a detective in the "Child's Play" reboot. "I never thought I would get to play British. I never imagined I would spend a month slapping the shit out of Brad Pitt on a train."

> "IT'S NOT JUST FOR ME, IT'S FOR EVERY SINGLE PERSON WHO SUPPORTED ME."
> —BRIAN TYREE HENRY

Atlanta: Guy D'Alema/FX; Lobby Hero: Joan Marcus

AWARDS CIRCUIT

Best Pic Int'l Film Doc Innovators

Oscar nominees repeat history, while international films come to the rescue of the specialty box office and documentary filmmakers have to innovate to stay in business.

Warner Bros. Pictures

Precedents Day

Best pic hopefuls find match with past winners

By Tim Gray

For nearly 100 years, pundits have predicted the outcome of Oscar voting. Sometimes it's an educated guess, but it's a guess nevertheless, since a minimal number of PricewaterhouseCoopers execs know the actual tallies and they never talk. So pundits often look to Oscar history to back up their theories, like tribal natives trying to predict their future by watching smoke from a volcano.

Too often, people talk about voting members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences as if they work as a unit: "They will never vote for this" or "they always love such-and-such." One of the fun aspects of predictions is that Academy history is like Scripture: You can always find something to back up your claims.

↑ "Elvis," starring Austin Butler, is a musical spectacle and big crowd pleaser.

This year, voters picked 10 very different films for best picture. Each has inspired predictions about why it couldn't win because "they" won't go for it. But actually, each has a precedent as an Oscar winner. So here's a matchup of this year's contenders with past winners that set the stage.

All Quiet on the Western Front

Of course this one has a direct ancestor: The 1930 "All Quiet" won for best picture and director (Lewis Milestone). Remakes often have an uphill battle with Academy voters: Only a handful have won, including "Ben-Hur," "The Departed" and last year's "CODA." But "All Quiet" also has

other more recent ancestors, such as "Platoon," that offer a gritty study of life in the trenches with a strong anti-war message.

Avatar: The Way of Water

With movies such as"Aliens" and "Terminator 2," James Cameron found great success by defying expectations. Naysayers were predicting the worst for "Avatar: The Way of Water," which ended up breaking box-office records and nabbing four Oscar noms, including best pic. So what's the film's precedent in the best-picture circle? It's the ultimate expectation-defying movie: Cameron's 1997 "Titanic." Despite gloomy predictions before it opened, the film featured a lot of heart, a rousing story, good acting and groundbreaking visual effects, much as "ATWOW." In other words, how can you compare James Cameron to anyone other than James Cameron?

The Banshees of Inisherin

Hollywood has always loved spotlighting a group of idiosyncratic people in an unusual setting, showing how their unique problems are actually quite universal. Martin McDonagh's film evokes memories of winners in very different settings, but that share the same DNA: "How Green Was My Valley," about a family in a Welsh mining village; "Going My Way," about two priests butting heads in NYC, with a heavy emphasis on Irish charm and stubbornness; and "Marty," centering on a Bronx butcher, his family and friends.

Elvis

This Presley biopic is 2022's answer to the 1951 "An American in Paris." The plot almost doesn't matter, because it provides the audience an opportunity to re-hear some classic tunes, performed with all the stops pulled out. Director Baz Luhrmann (working again with his wife, designer Catherine Martin) goes for big, brightly colored spectacle, as Vincente Minnelli did with "American" — and his 1958 "Gigi."

Everything Everywhere All at Once

The film has many fans, but some fear it's too "out there" to win enough Oscar votes to end in the winner's circle. Apparently they're forgetting "Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)," which is like "Everything": audiences half get caught up in the story and half sit in amazement over the dazzling filmmaking. It's also like "Annie Hall," which constantly jumped around in multiple time periods and featured digressions including animation and characters watching their younger selves. Past voters have also rewarded such logic-challenging films as "A Beautiful Mind" and "The Shape of Water."

The Fabelmans

Early reviews touted this as Steven Spielberg's love letter to cinema, but it's also a love letter to families and what happens when the group dynamics are disrupted. The Fabelman family are genetically linked with the Jarrett clan in "Ordinary People," which also featured Judd Hirsch in a supporting role, and the separated parents in "Kramer vs. Kramer."

Tár

Ever since Todd Field's film debuted at the Venice Film Festival, the media have written endlessly about Cate Blanchett, though nobody so far has compared her to Broderick Crawford. While "Tár" has traces of Billy Wilder's "The Lost Weekend," about a person forced to face their demons, Lydia Tár has more in common with the 1949 character played by Crawford: Willie Stark, the anti-hero of "All the King's Men," a fictionalized version of Southern politician Huey Long. Both Tár and Stark are reminders that power corrupts and absolute power is sheer hell for everyone around them.

↓ Though some pundits worried "Everything Everywhere All at Once" was too unique, Oscar voters have embraced it.

Top Gun: Maverick

Giant-scale blockbusters regularly took the top prize in Oscars' first 75 years, but it hasn't happened since 2003's "The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King." "Maverick" also has traces of "Mutiny on the Bounty" and "Patton," but its closest relative is the first best-picture winner, the 1927 "Wings." That film featured WWI fighter pilots, with action on the ground and amazing aerial sequences. Director Joseph Kosinski carries on the proud tradition on "Wings" director William Wellman.

Triangle of Sadness

Ruben Östlund offers both over-the-top comedy and deadpan subtlety in his three-act satire of the 1%. Östlund keeps audiences off-balance by offering a mixture of "Parasite," "American Beauty" and the 1938 "You Can't Take It With You," which offers a screwball approach to the haves and have-nots. And "Triangle" has a major asset that none of the earlier films had: actor Dolly de Leon, as the maid who proves invaluable on the island.

Women Talking

At first glance, Sarah Polley's film has little in common with the 1940 "Rebecca," but they are sisters under the skin. Both are adapted from novels; Polley's film is based on the work by Miriam Toews, while Alfred Hitchcock's was an adaptation of Daphne du Maurier's. More important, both are stories about women cowed into submission; they are humiliated when they don't act "nice," and they're gaslighted into being told what's normal behavior. Also like "Women Talking," recent winner "Nomadland" featured several women who form a community, united in their hardships. Both films also feature Frances McDormand as both actor and producer.

A24

Docs Strapped by Pricey Campaigns

What was once a low-key race has turned into a full-scale battle for Oscar gold

By Addie Morfoot

Last year, 144 documentary features were eligible for an Academy Award, but in reality, less than a third of those docs had a chance of making the 15-film shortlist. That, in part, is because garnering a spot on that competitive list requires not only a beautifully crafted film constructed by a talented director and crew, but also money.

In the past decade, platforms with deep pockets — Amazon, Apple TV+, Disney +, Netflix — began to spend on documentary award campaigns in ways that, prior to 2010, were unfathomable to the nonfiction film community. Before streamers came onto the scene, lobbying and marketing a doc during award season meant, if you were lucky, that a distributor took out a few "For Your Consideration" ads and hosted a handful of screenings. Now, depending on who the distributor is, FYC ads are plentiful, and small screenings have been transformed into events at New York's Crosby and Whitby hotels, costing tens of thousands of dollars. Further adding to campaign costs are billboards meant to woo Los Angeles Academy voters; e-blasts from prestigious nonfiction organizations including DOC NYC and the IDA (one blast from either org costs between $4,500 and $5,500); and employing top Oscar consultants to, hopefully, elevate a film's chances. (Not only do publicity consultants receive tens of thousands for their awards-whispering efforts, but they also collect bonuses if films make Oscar shortlists, score nominations and go on to win the gold.) But perhaps the most spent is on shipping doc directors and their respective studio publicists all over the world to hobnob with as many voters as possible. Sources who wished to remain anonymous say that the cost for such elaborate campaigns is in the low seven figures.

"If you are a guy with a tin cup and a documentary, you are really working hard because you don't have the cash," says Sony Pictures Classics co-president Tom Bernard. "You're up against a place like Discovery, which buys [a doc] for somewhere between $5 [million] and $7 million and all of a sudden, they are doing everything that could possibly be done for somebody who's going for best picture. So you're at an incredible disadvantage. And then, you look at the other streamers and they put together a package where they travel people around the world so people can do these rehearsed presentations for their films. The whole table is tilted towards the people with the money."

Bernard would know. Over the years Sony Pictures Classics has taken home 37 Academy Awards, five of which were in the documentary feature category.

This year SPC qualified five docs, including "Hallelujah: Leonard Cohen, a Journey" and "The Return of Tanya Tucker — Featuring Brandi Carlile."

In addition to a theatrical release, Bernard says that SPC spent $100,000 ($20,000 each) to make all five films available to the entire Academy on the Oscar screening room portal, as opposed to just making each doc available to the 651 members of the documentary branch. While

HBO

← HBO Max gave wider exposure to "All That Breathes."

We count on festival recognition and other filmmakers recognizing the quality of the work and truly wanting to honor one of their peers." — Lois Vossen

only the doc branch votes on the shortlist, the hope was that by making each doc accessible to all Oscar voters it would lead to a commodity more precious than advertising: word of mouth.

In the end, only "Hallelujah" was shortlisted but was not nominated. Instead, three HBO Max films, "All That Breathes," "All the Beauty and the Bloodshed" and "Navalny" garnered noms along with National Geographic's "Fire of Love" and POV's "A House Made of Splinters." (Warner Bros. Discovery owns HBO Max while Disney owns Nat Geo. PBS is behind POV.)

For streaming services such as HBO Max and Disney+, it makes sense to mount a costly documentary awards campaign. Not only does awards recognition lead to more subscribers, Oscar hardware also helps attract more A-list filmmakers.

National Geographic Documentary Films has the means to spend big on its slate of films, and it has paid off. Nat Geo's "Free Solo" won the 2019 Oscar for feature doc. In subsequent years, Nat Geo's "The Cave" received a nomination, while its features "The Rescue," "The First Wave," "The Territory" and "Retrograde" made the Oscar doc shortlist. This year Nat Geo's "Fire of Love" has been nominated for an Academy Award.

Carolyn Bernstein, National Geographic's exec VP of global scripted content and documentary films, admits that "awareness drives viewing, which drives voting." But she's quick to add that exceptional storytelling and craft are what really dictates voting.

"At the end of the day, it is about storytelling," Bernstein says. "It is about how a voter feels when he or she watches the film."

Making sure that voters see excellent works with little marketing budgets is a struggle for Lois Vossen, executive producer of PBS' Independent Lens.

"It's almost impossible for small films to compete," says Vossen. "I wouldn't even use the word compete — to just be in the conversation — because it's so much about spending and being in front of people and that visibility, whether it's getting on the shortlist or getting the nomination or ultimately winning."

Since the inception of Independent Lens in 1999, the PBS television distributor has received 10 Oscar nods for docs, including "Writing With Fire," "Hale County This Morning, This Evening" and "I Am Not Your Negro." In December, the Independent Lens doc "Hidden Letters" made the shortlist but did not get nominated.

Vossen says that Independent Lens has never four-walled a film, which in New York City costs approximately $17,000. Instead, either the doc finds a theatrical distributor or the filmmaker fundraises to cover the cost.

"We count on festival recognition and other filmmakers recognizing the quality of the work and truly wanting to honor one of their peers who they think has done an exceptional job," says Vossen. "That may sound like what everybody wants, but that is what we really rely on because we just don't have those resources to compete [financially]."

Despite the lack of funds, a PBS doc usually manages to sneak into the race. Last year it was "Writing With Fire," and this year, it's "A House Made of Splinters," which PBS's POV acquired last month, days before the film was nominated. (On Feb. 14, Giant Pictures announced the acquisition of U.S. theatrical and VOD rights to the doc.) After debuting at the Sundance Film Festival in 2022, "A House Made of Splinters" went on to screen at over 20 film festivals around the world. But director Simon Lereng Wilmont says that it has been difficult to find a U.S. audience. "We don't have any marketing budget, and we didn't have an [American] distributor until (January and February 2023)," he says. A Denmark/Finland/Sweden/Ukrainian production, the film's Oscar nom is a testament to the growing influence European doc branch members have over the category.

Bernard and Vossen agree that something needs to change when it comes to the Oscar doc feature. Bernard believes that the feature doc shortlist and the five nominees should be determined by Academy members who are not necessarily in the doc branch. He would like the category to operate like the international feature category, where Academy members from all branches are invited to participate in the shortlist and nomination voting.

"You've got this branch of 600-plus people that don't have enough time to see all the movies, and then you've got these people who are spending a fortune to get people to vote for their docs," says Bernard. "It's become an out-of-control situation. The Academy needs to step up and open up the documentary viewing for (the shortlist and nominations) to all Academy members who are certainly qualified to judge a documentary film."

Vossen is hoping that consolidation will eventually help even out the playing field.

"There will be some natural shift that will happen now because of the contraction happening at a lot of the platforms," she says. "With the staff layoffs and shrinking budgets, I would think that they are also going to shrink their awards budgets."

Simon Lereng Wilmont/Final Cut for Real

← PBS's POV acquired "A House Made of Splinters" just before the doc grabbed an Oscar nom.

3D Printing Helps Artisans Extend Reach

New tool's benefits range from prosthetics to animation

By Karen Idelson

One of the favorite tools of stop-motion filmmakers including Henry Selick and Guillermo del Toro for many years, 3D printing has become a dominant force in cutting edge costume design and prosthetics construction for this year's awards season frontrunners. As techniques, materials and methods for adding color continue to develop, its reach could extend even further.

Oscar-winning costume designer Ruth E. Carter has employed 3D printing techniques in her work for years. It was a crucial part of her designs for "Black Panther" and "Wakanda Forever," which just earned her a fourth Oscar nomination. For her most recent film, Carter was faced with challenges that included making costumes, jewelry and crowns that would hold up to difficult environments including water and photograph in the correct color tones.

↑ 3D printing helped create the shells for "Marcel the Shell With Shoes On."

A24

For the crown worn by Angela Bassett as well as other pieces including Namor's armor, Carter drew on multiple inspirations including the culture created by "Black Panther" and the Mesoamerican cultures of Central America. The costume designer collaborated with 3D printing expert and UCLA instructor, Julia Koerner, as part of the project.

"On 'Black Panther' we brought in 3D printing because there were new materials being developed that were wearable, flexible and softer," says Carter. "The first film was a film of prototypes. The process was expensive and slow, and we need a six-month lead time. Now we come to 'Wakanda Forever' and we have 3D printers in our offices. The 3D process really allows you to play with the line work on pieces and scan in a piece that might be an influence on a costume or armor. "

Adrien Morot, part of the Oscar-nommed team for makeup and hairstyling for "The Whale," used 3D printing to create the prosthetics that helped transform Brendan Fraser into a 600-pound man. He was able to use scans of Fraser's face to create a mold for the prosthetics that was designed with unprecedented precision and make subtle adjustments to the mold one the scan was done. After the mold was made by the 3D printer, he then poured a silicon material into it to fashion the prosthetics.

"It's a new era starting with 'The Whale' and things will never be the same again," says Morot. "I realized early on that the 3D printing had almost endless potential. So about five or six years ago we started doing in-house tests and they were surprisingly good. They were unlike anything I'd seen in the past 30 years."

Morot was able to create prosthetics that blended well with Fraser's skin with 3D printing. He was also able to create the number of prosthetics needed more quickly. Each prosthetic could only be used once in order to maintain the look of character that helmer Darren Aronofsky wanted.

Helmer Dean Fleischer Camp was able to create the shells he needed for "Marcel the Shell With Shoes On," which is Oscar-nommed in the animated feature category. Actual shells were too fragile for set lighting and impossible to recreate in order to have multiple versions of Marcel. The original version of Marcel was scanned and then sculpted using digital software Zbrush before 3D printing him multiple times for uses/poses in different scenes.

"The original Marcel was made from a real snail shell that is one of a kind," says Camp. "When you're filming him, you notice all the differences. He's only an inch tall and we're really on him. Even slight imperfections or differences in shells would give him different expressions. We were able to print shells where you really couldn't tell the difference. Then we worked with some very talented craftspeople who were able to hand paint the luminescence, the reflective qualities on the shell and the striations on the shell. But without 3D printing, I'd still be on a beach somewhere looking for shells that matched the original Marcel."

Underwater Majesty

'Avatar: The Way of Water' crew sets a new era tech table

By Daron James

Along with its record setting box office numbers and four Oscar nominations, "Avatar: The Way of Water" brings a "Metkayina" wave of impressive next-gen technology that will undeniably set new industry standards in motion capture, animation and underwater photography.

The original facial motion capture rig that also impressively immersed Andy Serkis as Gollum and Caesar, received an overhaul. Not only physically but also in the way the software replicates a performance.

"We looked at how the muscles in the face, eyes and lips are all related and created a neural network that maps all the connections between them," says senior VFX supervisor Joe Letteri. "This gave us this sympathetic motion in the actor's face which allowed us to translate the performance to the character and make each frame more believable."

Additionally, the single-standard definition camera that recorded facial expressions was replaced by two high-definition versions that provided more data and detail.

In recording the underwater activity, actors — and crew — trained in free diving methods to hold their breath for extended periods as air bubbles interfered with the performance capture. Actors wore a rig with a single camera attached that recorded their face while underwater camera operators documented body movement. Additionally, reference cameras were mounted above and below the water creating two separate capture volumes. This allowed actors to move freely underwater and above the surface without impeding their performance. Detailing the underwater imagery in 3D, director James Cameron turned to a specialized camera rig called the DeepX 3D invented by Australian cinematographer Pawel Achtel. The innovative design doesn't require a waterproof housing around the lens to eliminate distortion, creating the lush, crystal clear magic seen on screen.

→ "Quiet on the Western Front" wanted the audience to fell the horrors of war up close.

↓ "Avatar: The Way of Water" used a special camera rig that didn't require waterproof housing around the lens.

War Machine Incites Disquiet

Meat grinder brutality of WWI pic makes sure to resonate

By Todd Gilchrist

Even with predecessors such as "Paths of Glory," "A Very Long Engagement," "1917" and of course Lewis Milestone's 1930 best picture winner of the same name, director Edward Berger's adaptation of Erich Maria Remarque's bestseller "All Quiet on the Western Front" conveys the meat-grinder brutality — the violence, the blood, and the mud — of trench warfare unlike almost any film in the history of the medium.

"These kids are chewed up by the merciless war machine," says Berger. "They sign up for this war full of hopes and ideals, but very quickly they realize that they have lost everything in the mud, especially their innocence and their youth."

Before Berger brought the story to life on screen — for the first time in its native German — co-screenwriter Lesley Paterson spent years trying to capture a feeling that placed the audience in the heat of the conflict.

"There's a distance to the experience when you're reading it [in Remarque's novel] because it's so poetic," Paterson says. "So the battle sequences, we kind of leaned into how we wrote those, whether it was the flame throwers or the tanks going over the top just to add to the absolute devastation and foreign landscapes in shock that these young men were experiencing."

Paterson says that to further amplify the sense of inescapability these soldiers feel, they eliminated scenes of the home front that were a significant part of the novel. "We wanted the audience to experience that intensity of being those young men in the battlefield, and we felt like that intensity of emotion would be dissipated if we went back to the home front.

"We were always invested in [the main character] Paul and his reaction ... to make sure that the audience is essentially Paul, because it's so unrelentingly awful," Paterson says. "It truly is an anti-war film like we've never seen it before because there is no hero and because it's not an adventure."

Avatar: Way of the Water: 20th Century Studios; All Quiet on the Western Front: Reiner Bajo/Netflix

‘Greatest Show on Earth’ Inspires a Career

‘The Fabelmans’ sees DeMille train wreck through a boy’s eyes

By David Heuring

According to director of photography Janusz Kaminski, Steven Spielberg’s earliest home movies still exist, and were consulted for the scene in “The Fabelmans” in which young Sammy Fabelman recreates a train crash scene from Cecil B. DeMille’s 1952 film “The Greatest Show on Earth.”

“We’ve watched them before, but they are a little too primitive for our purposes,” says Kaminski, veteran of 19 films with the director. “They’re clever, but it was harder back then for a kid. We needed something a bit more slick that would work within our overall film.”

Kaminski shot the majority of the film on 35mm film emulsion, as he usually does with Spielberg. Extensive testing revealed that actual 8mm wasn’t practical in part because striking a print was inconvenient. Kaminski shot the boy’s first attempt, done before he acquires a camera, in 35 mm format, with the sequence ending on a delicately lit closeup of the boy’s rapt face.

A bit later, after the boy receives a windup 8mm camera, he restages the crash and films it. He projects the resulting footage in his closet projection room, showing his mother, played by Michelle Williams, who proclaims it ”the greatest show on earth.”

These brief shots were actually accomplished by second unit director of photography Magdalena Gorka, using the 16mm film format and a Frazier lens, a specialized lens that adds apparent depth of field and allows for unusual angles. The set was built on a stage in Santa Clarita and the shots were done over two days.

“Steven knew exactly what he wanted, and gave very precise instructions,” says Gorka. “He wanted to be really close to the train, as though you’re seeing it coming at you through the boy’s eyes. The Frazier lens allowed for that proximity, along with the huge depth of field. Steven is technically very savvy, and then he improves each shot with every take. Janusz and Steven were working nearby on a another set, and would look things over and approve or give notes before and after each take.”

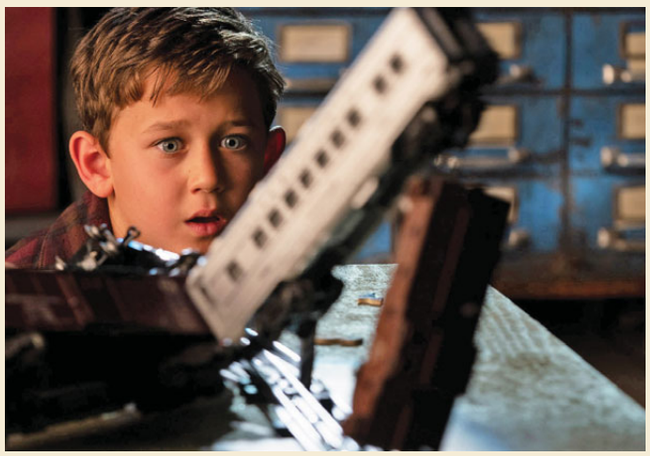
Gorka sometimes purposefully flared the lens with a flashlight.

“Janusz had lit the set in his very specific style, which is nearly impossible to repeat or emulate,” says Gorka. “He uses very strong, dramatic and intuitive lighting that somehow looks very natural. It’s masterful and magical.”

These images, based loosely on the shots in the DeMille movie, were then manipulated in the digital intermediate to add contrast, saturation, edge fogging and additional flares redolent of amateur 8mm cinematography.

“The trick was to make these small objects feel big, powerful and exciting, as they would appear to a young boy,” says Gorka. “It was definitely a unique assignment.”

→ Mateo Zoryon Francis-DeFord as the young filmmaker in “The Fabelmans”



→ Cecil B. DeMille’s “The Greatest Show on Earth” inspired Steven Spielberg’s film.

“The trick was to make these small objects feel big, powerful and exciting, as they would appear to a young boy.” — Magdalena Gorka

Fabelmans: Merie Weismiller Wallace/Universal Pictures/Amblin Entertainment; Greatest Show on Earth: Everett Collection

Specialty B.O. Needs Help

Foreign-language films send help to U.S. theaters

By Gregg Goldstein

Many are wondering about the state of the specialty film theatrical marketplace and how to save it. Talk to people in the industry and you'll hear the same issues: too few new films, little market research data and theatrical windows so short that, by the time indies get to many art houses, they're out on PVOD, cutting into box office.

"The pandemic hit a hard reset of sorts on the industry," says Comscore senior media analyst Paul Dergarabedian. "Disruption to the release calendar and production delays created a unique opportunity for international and event cinema to land higher up on the box-office chart. Ironically, streaming may have had a hand in this. Small-screen viewership increased during the pandemic, exposing viewers to a broader range of movies, such as faith-based and international films."

In the first few weeks of 2023, a larger number than usual foreign films and event releases took over the specialty box office. The top five as of Feb. 20 are Yash Raj Films USA's Indian spy thriller "Pathaan" ($16.2 million), Trafalgar's K-pop concert doc "BTS: Yet to Come to Cinemas" ($8 million), Fathom Events' biblical drama "The Chosen Season 3 Finale," of viewers age 18-34, 74% ages 35+ based on Fathom website ticket sales), Neon's thriller "Infinity Pool" ($5 million, 71% 18-34, 26% 35+ based on Comscore data) andWell Go USA Entertainment's Chinese sci-fi actioner "The Wandering Earth II" ($4.8 million).

↑ Shah Rukh Khan and Deepika Padukone star in Hindi-language "Pathaan."

In the five years since "Parasite" won the best picture Oscar, the specialty cinema sector has been bolstered by foreign-language films, some of which have done better than many recent English-language specialty film releases. The two biggest surprise hits were from India, both of them fueled by anticipation for big stars that built up after several pandemic delays, with fans who traditionally make opening weekend viewing a priority. Sarigama Cinemas' action extravaganza "RRR" ($14.9 million), starring Ram Charan and NTR Jr., was the sixth biggest indie hit released last year.

The studio's CEO, Chandra Narisetty, researched the top markets for past Telugu-language hits in Texas, New York, Virginia, California and the Atlanta and Seattle area, staged LED truck campaigns and held out for Dolby Vision screens, charging as much as $40 a seat. According to EntTelligence's Steve Buck, "RRR"'s average general admission price was $24.76, more than double the 2022 national average of $11.75.

"As we watched shows getting filled [to] 70% [capacity], we alerted circuits to add more" before it opened in 1,200 theaters, Narisetty says. He enlisted Dylan Marchetti's Variance Films for a summer "encoRRRe" presentation, adding $300,000 in box office and setting it up as an awards favorite. While the film was not India's entry in the international film race, it racked up a song nom for "Naatu Naatu."

Yash Raj Films/Everett Collection

Hindi film fans were awaiting the long-delayed fourth installment of the YRF (Yash Raj Films) Spy Universe franchise, "Pathaan." Nelson D'Souza, YRF's VP of international distribution, says, "the strategy was simple: hold back as much as possible so that there [was] a frenzy to watch the biggest superstar in the overseas market, Shah Rukh Khan, in — and as — Pathaan, in theaters. We steered away from interviews, tours and fan-engagement activity so that if people wanted to get a piece of Shah Rukh Khan, it had to be in theaters."

It worked: topping out at 695 screens with an average $13.82 ticket price, the film has grossed $16.2 million and counting since Jan. 25.

Another foreign language film that is drawing interest is the German "All Quiet on the Western Front." The Netflix film has been playing in limited release in theaters and on the streamer since October, but because it's a "four-walled" release, no official box office figures are available.

Even without international superstars, there's more that can be done to help specialty film box office.

Where filmmakers and stars aren't available for promotional appearances, for example, Film at Lincoln Center operations & production VP Matt Bolish says his org makes New York Film Festival talent Q&As available to theaters across the country. Mark Fishkin, who runs the Smith Rafael Film Center owned by the California Film Institute in San Rafael, Calif., thinks his educational programs will help cultivate younger viewers, and may encourage them to bring their parents to screenings as paying customers. And as 35MM projectors break down, Art House Convergence board member Deirdre Haj says studios should work harder to digitize catalog titles that help keep theaters like hers afloat.

"One of the biggest problems is [the lack of] a system to tell audiences what's playing in their town on a timely basis," says Sony Pictures Classics co-president Tom Bernard. "Theaters need to reach out to their customers in a way that they've never done, and that's by upgrading their marketing machine, data and customer profiles. So if theaters say to any studio, 'We have information on the type of film you have for Minneapolis, or our chain, we'll charge you X dollars to send out a specific email to customers we know are gonna connect to your film.' Theaters haven't realized what data they own, and they haven't monetized their data in the way that Live Nation or Ticketmaster do." He points to a few who are doing this, like Angelika Film Centers in New York and other cities, Manhattan's Film Forum and Boston's Coolidge Corner Theatre, which offer memberships or newsletters.

↑ Germany's "All Quiet on the Western Front" has won awards, most recently at BAFTA.

↓ S.S. Rajamouli's Telugu-language "RRR" has drawn audiences across the world.

All Quiet on the Western Front: Reiner Bajo/Netflix; RRR: Variance Films/DVV Entertainment

"Theaters need to reach out to their customers in a way they've never done, and that's by upgrading their marketing machine, data and customer profiles." — Tom Bernard

His concerns are echoed by Haj, who runs the Ruth Sokolof and Dundee theaters in Omaha, Neb. While Haj doesn't speak for Art House Convergence, she points to studios as the issue. "A distributor may call the booker and say, 'We're going to give you this film,' and we have five days before we know we're getting it. So advertising it is impossible," she says.

SPC's Bernard has a potential solution. "We're now meeting with marketing departments of small theaters about how we can work with them to create assets, maybe upgrade their marketing and put a joint plan together, so we can work three or four weeks in advance."

Another issue is studios that favor multiplexes, sending films to art houses late with a reduced cut of the box office, or not at all. "One distributor that had a real art house title made the decision not to give the film to art houses," Haj and another exhibitor say. "They told our booker: 'I'm not interested in cashing all those little checks from all over the country.'" She adds that it's usually more profitable to run revival series.

"The major exhibitors don't have as much product as they normally have had, so they may be more aggressive for specialty product," says Mark Fishkin, who runs the Smith Rafael Film Center owned by the California Film Institute in San Rafael, Calif. "That's added to art houses not having films which may resonate with an audience that hasn't been in theaters for two or three years."

Some foreign films are helping, and so will knowing more about targeting the audiences who enjoy them. "I'm looking a little deeper into who my members are, where they are coming from and who I am missing," Haj says. "We have to think like the museum down the road and curate for our communities, because all art is local."

‘Quiet’ Made Noise a Century Ago

Timeless classic stirred up politicians in 1930, and still has poignant power

By Steven Gaydos

The power of an important story told with passion and unflinching clarity always transcends the bonds of time. This explains the durability of Shakespeare’s plays when they land in the right hands, and it explains Edward Berger’s adaptation of Erich Maria Remarque’s fierce anti-war novel, “All Quite on the Western Front,” which is nominated for the best picture Oscar.

Nearly a century ago, director Lewis Milestone triumphed in one of the first Oscar competitions with his Universal Pictures version of the 1928 tome, filmed, remarkably, completely in and around its Hollywood Studio home.

Today, “Front” is registering with voters who are seeing the horrors of war in Europe live and in color as it sadly unfolds again with Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

When Milestone filmed his “Front,” WWI was a decade behind the voters, who had just roared through the 1920s and hadn’t yet confronted the grueling toll of the Depression or the deadly threat posed by the rise of Nazism in Germany.

So the first “Front” dominated the news in Hollywood — not only as a humanitarian wakeup call to stop a war or all wars, but was also covered from all angles a big new picture from Universal deserved.

It was noted at the time that the film’s young star, Lew Ayres, had leaped from “banjo player in an orchestra” to hottest young leading man in the movies.

Variety dutifully reported the top fiction bestsellers of the time and Remarque’s stark novel was an international sensation.

And as for the Nazis, *Variety* was reporting on rumblings in Europe when “Front” was finally released. G.W. Pabst made his own version of strikingly similar material, titled “West Front 1918” and the National Socialists hated its pacifistic message. Ditto Milestone’s epic, when released caused movie theater mayhem in Germany, all whipped up by Nazis, including their propaganda chief, Josef Goebbels. Milestone’s masterpiece was quickly banned in Germany and Austria.

Variety reported on Dec. 24, 1930: “The Austrian government yesterday (Monday) decided that If Germany had ruled ‘In Western Nichts Neues’ was an insult to the Germanic people, Austria couldn’t take any other attitude.”

What is remembered, however, is the power of the picture and the first “Front” remains a high-water mark of early studio artistry in the brand-new sound era. Berger’s version of the novel benefits from a century of filmmaking technology but less happily, its humanistic plea for an end to war remains a dream more elusive than capturing the dancing beams of light on a white screen.

“All Quiet on the Western Front” won director Lewis Milestone kudos at one of the first Oscar ceremonies. Could it triumph again?

AUSTRIA URGES ‘ALL QUIET’ BAN

Vienna, Dec. 23.

The Austrian government yesterday (Monday) decided that if Germany had ruled “In Western Nichts Neues” was an insult to the Germanic people, Austria couldn’t take any other attitude.

It accordingly announced that although prohibition of the subject was properly a matter for the provinces to decide, the cabinet regarded the German action as appropriate. Government thus makes an appeal to the provinces to act in the interests of national unity and it is probable they will support the appeal with the probable exception of Vienna, which is a province as well as a city.

Vienna, of course, is the center of film presentation and therefore the real battleground, both for Univer-

All Quiet on the Western Front: Reiner Bajo/Netflix (2)

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